

DR. T & THE WOMEN

VENICE FILM FESTIVAL REVIEW

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Altman's on auto pilot again. With a predictably stellar all-star cast and a bebop score to keep you awake during its more flaccid moments, the fleetingly enjoyable comedy/romance "Dr. T. & the Women" breaks no new ground for the maverick American director, but manages to convince us how satisfying even his lesser works can be.

Here comes Altman hobbling along on the same professional crutch as his casting-coup compatriot Woody Allen, assembling savvy, multi-generational ensembles in order to cloak the fact that the narrative intricacies aren't quite what they used to be, the conversation is mostly empty and uninspired, and the dissected milieu doesn't delve as deep as star-struck Nashville during an election year or Los Angeles turned tetchy by egomania and plate tectonics.

Mining a terrain best described as "The Player" with vaginas, Richard Gere -- giving good pap smear, for what it's worth -- delivers another methodical but savvy performance as overworked Dallas society gynecologist Sullivan Travis. Dr. T's an alarmingly handsome and popular local figure with a messy dilemma: He can't keep his amorous female clientele out of his waiting room. Even the ladies in his own living room, including his bonkers wife (Farrah Fawcett) and two twenty-something daughters (Kate Hudson and Tara Reid), won't leave him with much peace. Fawcett quickly regresses to a child-like mental state (art imitating life, apparently) and enters a sanatorium after stripping off all her clothes in the local mall. Her alcoholic, divorcee sister (Laura Dern) helps Travis's elder daughter prepare for her wedding day while Dr. T chases after a sexy lady golf pro, played by Helen Hunt.

The world dissected in "Dr. T & the Women" is modern-day Dallas high society and Altman's latest archaeological dig is only slightly less garish than the Dallas of J.R. and Sue Ellen Ewing. We're served up country-clubby, couture-addicted wives and their Jessica Simpson-channeling daughters flocking to gaudy Dior miniskirt suits and Escada leather jackets -- Dora Granata is the film's costume designer and she's done the best job of bringing alive a garish milieu since Sandy Powell re-created glam rock in "Velvet Goldmine." It's the most vulgar-looking picture in years and at times it's a hoot.

In one scene, Dern stumbles into a room wearing outlandish golden blonde tresses and a fur-trimmed yellow cape with matching stiletto boots -- out-trumping Ivana

and Patsy Stone. Altman has a lot of fun casting his eye on the trashiness of the New Dallas. But it's at the expense of the characters, who are so superficial and cartoonish that it's nearly impossible to regard them as real folks -- something Altman used to be able to attain rather effortlessly. Once upon a time, an outlandish supporting character like Shelley Duvall in "Nashville" might clodhop through a scene or two. Now everyone in an Altman film has to be larger than life and mugging for the camera.

Anne Rapp's script explores notions of community that are somehow less convincing than in her previous effort, the perplexing "Cookie's Fortune," which seemed less like an Altman film than a benevolent pastiche of Tennessee Williams' freakish Southern Gothic. The problem with "Dr. T. & the Women," on a writing level, is that there isn't very much community to convey. The Dallas depicted here is all surface glitz and bad dresses: socialites in St. John capes frolicking at fund raisers or bickering AbFab style, in the waiting room of Dr. T's ob/gyn offices; and sterile outdoor public spaces with garish architectural flourishes that dwarf and suffocate the characters. Altman's inability as a director to conjure up this sense of community isn't really his fault -- Dallas is so larger than life that he can't control it. But at least in "Cookie's Fortune" the characters felt like part of the Deep Southern landscape they inhabited. Dr. T's motley crew of fools feels more like adornments, like they were scrawled on the screen with heavy lipstick.

The film's conclusion (which Altman has begged critics not to write about, perhaps because it's so awful) makes it appear as though "Dr. T & the Women" and its Dallas milieu is literally crumbling to pieces before our eyes, sort of like Hollywood did at the end of "The Day of the Locust." Altman toiled with the same sort of terse anomie in "Short Cuts" and it worked, because that film's interstitially joined characters were so much a part of the L.A. infrastructure that they would have snapped if the city didn't first.

Not so with the characters here. They're too superficially rendered, and they're never allowed to truly come alive. "Dr. T." is billed as a comedy/romance and while it's funny in parts (thanks mostly to the deft screwball abilities of Laura Dern and Shelley Long, who plays Dr. T.'s randy assistant and who makes you realize how sorely she's been missed) it's almost never romantic, not even when Gere falls for the seemingly down-to-earth Helen Hunt. The casting is too clever by half -- it nearly eclipses the costume design in its outlandishness. After all, what is the likelihood of Richard Gere administering a pap smear?

There's nothing overtly terrible in "Dr. T. & the Women" like there was in "Ready to Wear," in which Sophia Loren, in a feat of cruel symbolism, was sent traipsing through a pile of dog shit that left stains on Altman's CV trailing deep into the last decade. But there's a lingering sense of failure at work in the latest Altman that makes you wonder if the master has any tricks left up his sleeve. Or if he's simply

doomed to direct different permutations of the same ensemble-driven formula he's been honing since the '70s.

I really wish I could give away Dr. T's "twist" of an ending because it demonstrates just how far the great Altman has fallen since his heyday a quarter of a century ago. In the jaw-dropping closing images of the film, the great maverick resorts to something akin to a money shot in a pornographic film, and it simply doesn't work. If it's rebirth Altman's looking for, isn't the DVD release of "Nashville" delivery enough?

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